

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000487

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: OADR

TAGS: ZI PGOV

SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE ELECTIONS: SMOOTH OPENING

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CHRISTOPHER DELL

REASON 1.4 (B)

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Early diplomatic observer reports characterize Zimbabwe's parliamentary elections as peaceful and orderly with only isolated reports of government or ruling ZANU-PF harassment of the opposition MDC. Diplomatic observer teams are reporting long queues at many polling stations, but shorter than in the 2000 or 2002 elections. Voters have been patiently waiting to cast their votes. The one incident to mar an otherwise smooth opening of the polling is the reported disappearance of MDC candidate Siyabonga Ncube (Filabusi constituency in Mtabeleland). We have few details at this point but expect to know more later in the day. END
SUMMARY

A Quiet Start

¶12. (SBU) The 24 U.S. Embassy observer teams and around 20 teams from other western embassies deployed nationwide have reported often sizable lines of Zimbabweans waiting in orderly queues to cast their vote. As of 1130 local time, lines in urban areas in Harare, Mutare, and other cities have generally been between 100-500 voters, with rural areas reporting queues of considerably less than 100 individuals. Despite the long lines, observers have reported generally calm and orderly voting with the size of the queues decreasing by the hour. By late morning the long lines had dwindled considerably, in part due to on the spot efforts by election supervisors to improve their procedures.

¶13. (SBU) Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) officials, presiding officers, and other polling officers were reported to have largely adhered to the electoral code of conduct, including requiring the inking of voters' fingers, sealing ballot boxes with at least a lock or plastic tie (or both), and helping voters in need of assistance. Observers in polling places in Murewa and Masvingo did note high numbers of assisted voters, up to 40% at one polling station, although most did appear in genuine need of assistance. Observers have also noted numerous voters who were turned away because their names were not on the voter list, possibly a result of redrawn districts. ZEC officials on multiple occasions have refused observers' requests for information on turnout, although this likely extends from an unfamiliarity with observers' rights rather than a concerted campaign to deny information to the international community.

¶14. (SBU) Zimbabwe Election System Network (ZESN) monitors were ubiquitous at most polling places, as were the party monitors. (N.B. There were 6000 ZESN monitors for the 8000 polling places.) ZESN officials also reported that their observers' early impressions were of generally calm voting with only a handful of exceptions, and no pattern to those. They did, however, note that their relatively inexperienced monitors had yet to report any sense of the turnout. In Mashonaland East, the ZESN provincial coordinator speculated that the large number of polling places for this election probably explains the relatively low numbers of voters at most stations and she thought the overall turnout was high.

VIOLENCE AT A MINIMUM

¶15. (SBU) Compared to the 2002 and 2000 elections, reports of violence are almost non-existent. Most irregularities reported have been little more than inappropriate questioning of voters by ZANU-PF members and campaigning near polling places. Ruling party members in Bindura in Mashonaland Central province, which has seen long queues of voters, reportedly have been questioning voters about their selection and making notations on voter lists. Embassy observers in Gwanda, near Bulawayo, reported that official MDC observers were not allowed into the polling place because their names were not on the proper list; ZANU-PF officials were allowed into the same station. EU observers noted similar refusals for MDC officials in a number of polling stations nationwide.

¶16. (SBU) The most disconcerting report has been the possible

disappearance of MDC candidate Siyabonga Ncube in Filabusi, near Bulawayo. The constituency went to the MDC in the last election but has since been gerrymandered by the government to favor the ZANU-PF candidate and was considered a "toss-up." According to MDC officials in the area, ZANU-PF members on Wednesday evening made "intimidating remarks" to Ncube. Ncube then left the area, telling party members he would soon be back, but has not been heard from since. The MDC's electoral hotline is reporting the disappearance as a likely case of government dirty tricks. The MDC is attempting to verify Ncube's welfare and whereabouts and has promised to let us know as soon as he is located.

CONCLUSION

¶7. (C) It is still much too early to say whether the MDC's forward momentum in recent weeks will translate into election results. However, the lack of election day hi-jinks by ruling party members and government security forces is certainly a positive sign. As Morgan Tsvangirai told the Ambassador and DCM late on March 30, knowing they are now a minority party, ZANU-PF supporters do not want to risk provocations.

Dell